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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the possible creation of communications networks for school superintendents, and discusses EdLink, a pilot joint venture among Apple and GEISCO (General Electric Information Services Corporation), the joint developers of AppleLink, and the office of the New Hampshire Governor's Excellence Initiative. Arguing that EdLink (AppleLink) is flexible, easy to use, and cost effective, this report describes the use of the system by superintendents and other staff members of local school districts during the pilot study. It is noted that many superintendents participating in this program, once introduced to the MacIntosh, also used this microcomputer for a variety of other software applications, including word processing, graphics, and desktop publishing. It is concluded that users will use a chosen system only if that system is easy to use and has observable benefits. (EW)

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Superintendents at the Workstation?

Larry Vaughan

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What's the job of school superintendent really like? Well, we know it's not an easy job. There is a large volume of information both coming and going; there are many decisions to be made; and there is that all-important job of providing the kind of leadership for curriculum and instruction that can maximize student learning.

Peter Drucker has said, "If the computer doesn't enable us to simplify our organizations, it's being abused." Can an electronic network for educators simplify our educational organizations? Will the power of the computer provide enough of an increase in efficiency and effectiveness to lure the busy superintendent to the workstation? What kinds of information should be put on a network for school superintendents and other administrators? How should it be organized? What information processing tools will superintendents need to learn to use in order to utilize a network effectively?

These and many other questions have arisen. Several groups across the nation are pondering the utility of electronic communications for presenting solutions to education problems. Others are wondering if education presents a "real" market for electronic information services and products or just another risky venture into a national market that lacks a national-level organizational structure.

All this pondering has led groups to conceptualize, configure, and pilot electronic networks for educators. I am pleased to observe that the recent pilot networks with which I have firsthand experience have a great deal of potential for presenting solutions to many persistent educational communication problems. This potential should be particularly important to superintendents who, studies suggest, devote approximately 40 percent of their contact time exclusively to the transmisson of information.

AppleLink has much promise for educators. AppleLink was developed by Apple and the General Electric Information Services Corporation (GEISCO) in order to solve Apple's internal communication problems. It has many versatile features such as searchable data bases called libraries, one-way bulletin boards organized hierarchically, two-way interactive bulletin boards where users can add their own messages to existing topic-specific files, and single or multiple addressee electronic mail. AppleLink is accessed via modem, and the system is operated on a large mainframe computer by GEISCO. I won't describe the "look and feel" of AppleLink since those details are available elsewhere in this publication (see Bressler).

By all accounts I've heard, AppleLink has served Apple very well since its initial implementation in the spring of 1985. It was specifically designed to accommodate multiple levels of communication needs typical to a large corporation like Apple, with many employees spread across several divisions, and thousands of dealers across the world. AppleLink is a full-service information utility with a complex structure of interlocking information services that allow point-to-point and point-to-multipoint communications.

Yet this complexity is not apparent to the user. In fact, I personally know more than a dozen education professionals who learned to use AppleLink successfully in less than one hour in spite of the fact that they were not previously considered computer users. Also, I know more than 20 superintendents who regularly communicate with one another, send multiaddressee electronic mail, upload and download material from bulletin boards, and so on. These education professionals were part of a pilot joint venture among Apple, GEISCO, and the office of New Hampshire Governor's Excellence Initiative. This pilot was called EdLink.

We learned much through the pilot project; early in the game we knew we would not be willing to give it up after the pilot phase. Superintendents accessed EdLink approximately four times per week during the pilot project. While some bulletin board applications were popular, the most frequently used features were single-point and multipoint electronic mail. The content of communications varied widely, but most of it had to do with gaining rapid access to the experience and perspective of one's peers regarding how to handle particular problems. A few superintendents seemed to be almost addicted to this new information utility, with average access of more than twice daily. Conversely, a few pilot participants used EdLink only once or twice per week. More than once, a frustrated administrator had to telephone peers to tell them to read their electronic mail. Such variation in use is typical of new systems.

Perhaps the most important lesson from EdLink is that people will employ and value a powerful communication tool if it is easy to use. I've been part of other less successful pilot projects in which educators were expected to learn to branch across several command levels, each with a unique set of commands, before they could read or send a message. Busy administrators in any profession want tools that make their work more efficient and effective, but they don't want to memorize hundreds of commands to gain this efficiency. That's the beauty of AppleLink—it's easy to learn and use. Yet it is multifaceted and powerful.

A flexible information utility like AppleLink could be adapted to fit the communication needs of an educational organization of any size. The New Hampshire EdLink system was designed for statewide application. Participants included the commissioner and several staff members of the State Department of Education, superintendents, a few business administrators, computer coordinators, the office of the Governor's Initiative, and other selected educators. The main features of this system included:

- A one-way bulletin board on the state's education regulations
- A two-way bulletin board for users to post messages of interest to a variety of groups (superintendents, Governor's Initiative staff, computer coordinators, and so on)
- A variety of Apple-oriented data bases and bulletin boards
- Electronic mail

With the exception of the state regulations bulletin board, these features were used frequently. Press releases were posted by the State Department of Education on the two-way bulletin board. The commissioner's office and staff of the State Department of Education frequently used point-to-multipoint electronic mail. They could write one message and simultaneously send it to a whole class of users (for example, superintendents, computer coordinators, every user in the state). Since each user maintains an address book on AppleLink software, it is easy to set up group addresses that can be used many times.

Superintendents and other staff members of local school districts used the electronic mail features frequently. They also made good use of the group address functions. A superintendent could send a message to everyone on the system by simply addressing the memo to "$EDLINK." Here are some examples:

- One superintendent started his own forum on a set of proposed federal regulations by sending a one-page memo to all superintendents and inviting response.
- Most superintendents sent group links to their peers asking advice on how to handle a particular issue.

- Several superintendents advertised to fill teaching or administrative vacancies.

- Superintendents requested data and/or documents about particular curriculum issues.

Like other means of communication, EdLink brings like-minded persons together. Some superintendents used EdLink frequently to participate in regional superintendent group discussions. Others sought out frequent communications with superintendents whose districts were similar to their own in size, location, tax base, and the like.

Many of the superintendents used EdLink to report to the State Department of Education. Several of the standard state forms were developed as blank "shells" on Microsoft Excel. Superintendents could download the shell from a bulletin board, enter relevant data, and link the information directly to the State Department of Education in a format exactly like that of the printed state form. Also, surveys were developed and sent to local addresses as disk files. These were filled out and returned as the state reporting forms were.

Spinoffs of the EdLink experience started occurring midway through the pilot phase. Some of the larger districts have obtained addresses for all school principals so they can communicate with the central office and quickly move information back and forth. Special-interest groups have formed around topics like business administration, computer use, and selected curriculum issues. EdLink has already influenced the current reorganization of functions within the State Department of Education regarding roles that involve information dissemination to the field. In the future we expect a school principals' forum to develop on the two-way bulletin board, and much more traffic because there will be more users.

As one would expect, when you teach people to use a powerful tool like the Macintosh for communications, they tend to discover other uses for the computer. Most of the superintendents in the pilot also regularly use word processing and graphics programs. Many learned to use Microsoft Excel to prepare district budgets and charts and graphs to use in presentations for the local school board and the public. Some have discovered the wonders of desktop publishing; and since they already have modems, some have reached out to other on-line resource bases and information utilities.

So what's next? What do I recommend on the basis of experience? Well, AppleLink has many good features. Because it is so easy to learn and use, it is feasible to design a customized system of communication without leaving out any education practitioner. The EdLink experience has demonstrated that statewide systems work. Today there are well over 1,000 educators who are regular users of AppleLink, and these include several districtwide installations. And there are obvious implications for more nationally oriented educational communication services via something like AppleLink.

AppleLink was designed to run on the Macintosh computer. Recently Apple has released software that enables Apple II family computers to access this communications utility. The new version was designed to have the "look and feel" of AppleWorks®, using a desktop metaphor.

There are a number of decisions to consider. Costs are one decision point that seems to favor AppleLink because, unlike other information utilities, AppleLink enables users to prepare messages off-line easily and send/receive information quickly, thus minimizing connect charges. However, I think the most important business decision is an old familiar one: "buy or rent." New networking products are entering the marketplace—even some that operate in the friendly Macintosh environment. So some groups may wish to consider whether they should set up their own local or regional educational network. There are many trade-offs buried in this decision.

The future holds much promise for those groups of educators who value communication with their peers and access to resource bases. To me, the most important issue is: Will the intended users actually use the system you choose? If users don't see the benefits or find the system hard to use, then communication problems will persist in spite of resource investment.

Larry Vaughan

Larry Vaughan is an independent consultant who has done a great deal of work on technological applications to education. During his career he has worked for various nonprofit educational service agencies. He has been involved with computer instruction for about 20 years, beginning in graduate school with evaluation studies of the "Talking Typewriter." At the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center, he worked extensively with the Experimental Time Sharing System, conducting research on software applications for elementary school teachers and students.

During the last five years, Mr. Vaughan has concentrated on helping schools understand the power of technology to produce solutions to their most pressing problems. Part of his work has been encouraging schools to make effective use of instructional technology in curriculum areas. He has coordinated several regional computer instruction conferences, convened educational

technology task forces, and produced and edited a number of resource books for educators, including:

- Technology Programs that Work
- Evaluation of Educational Software: A Guide to Guides
- Computers in the Classroom: Experiences Teaching with Flexible Tools

Mr. Vaughan was the executive producer of "Computers in Education: A Mid-Eighties View," a series of three 90-minute video programs broadcast via satellite to a nationwide audience. Also, he developed an electronic newsletter called TECH TALK for educators on The Source. Mr. Vaughan's most recent work has concentrated on promoting the use of tool software in classrooms and other educational settings.